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SPICES - for Pandi (Mutuma)

Ama Ata Aidoo

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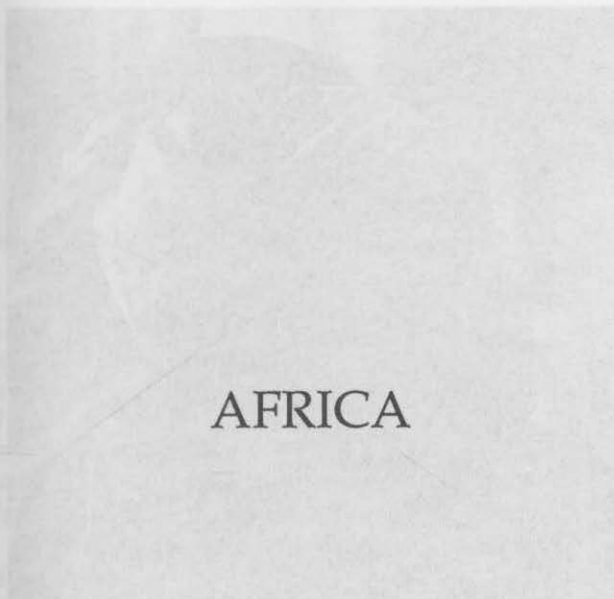
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SPICES - for Pandi (Mutuma)

Abstract

Actually, I could handle the matter of peppercorns really well since I can still see Mother leaving them to ripen on the odupon.



AFRICA

Ama Ata Aidoo was born in Ghana and is a pioneer in depicting the role of African women. While she was still an undergraduate at the University of Ghana in Lagos she was awarded a prize in a competition sponsored by the Midwest Club in London. She has travelled widely in Africa, Europe and the USA and spent some time in the United States. She was also Minister for Education in the Ghanaian government in the 1980s. Her writing includes two plays, *Children of a Corner* and *When the Rain Comes*, a very successful season in London in 1991, two volumes of poetry, *Sometimes Talking is Sometime and the Day is Later* in January (published by Dangaroo Press in 1992), a collection of short stories, *No Season for Love*, and two novels, *Our Sister Kitty* and *Changes* (1991). The latter won first prize for the best African region in the 1992 Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Her writing is sometimes experimental and combines both African and Western traditions.



Ama Ata Aidoo was born in Ghana and is a pioneer in depicting the role of African women. Whilst she was still an undergraduate at the University of Ghana in Lagos she was awarded a prize in a competition sponsored by the Mbari Club in Ibadan. She has travelled widely in Africa, Europe and the USA, and apart from a distinguished academic career she was also Minister for Education in the Ghanaian government in the 1980s. Her writing includes two plays, *Dilemma of a Ghost* and *Anowa* (the latter had a very successful season in London in 1991), two volumes of poetry, *Someone Talking is Sometime* and *An Angry Letter in January* (published by Dangaroo Press in 1992), a collection of short stories, *No Sweetness Here*, and two novels, *Our Sister Kiljoy* and *Changes* (1991). The latter won first prize for the African region in the 1992 Commonwealth Writers Prize. Her writing is sometimes experimental, and combines both African and Western traditions.

Ama Ata Aidoo

SPICES

- for Pandi (Mutuma)

Actually,
I could handle the matter of
peppercorns
really well since
I can still see Mother
leaving them to ripen
on the *odupon*.

A proper parasite if ever there was one
who vinily and shamelessly
sprouted by giant roots
secured itself to massive ancestral trunks and
wove thin firm tendrils
singing a long and difficult solo
through the dappled undergrowths
then

lay queenly and luxuriantly on the branches and
on each wider, greener, thicker leaf,
until up and up and up
it reached its highest crescendo and kissed
the glorious sun
gloriously.

II

My Sister,
we shall not even discuss
ginger,
wild mint or
its more delicate kin
which acquired
the anti-chicken name *akoko-besa*
meaning *fowls-end*;
when grown in

old chamber- and water-poets, and
other closed-in spaces
behind the bedroom wall.

Can you believe that?

III

On the other hand,
The Pepper-master's and
The Pepper-mistress's
pepper
is another story.

There was a time when it was known only to
priests, priestesses, prophets and
sundry holy ones
who ate the sacred stuff to sharpen
their tongues

IV

When you first dropped your
artful reproof,
startling me with
its delicious wit and sweet censure,

I first and
guiltily
saw clear evidence of
my westernization,
or rather
the ease with which
the food-lover in me had taken to
'foreign cuts' of meat:
the steaks, the chops and

the briskets
duly cased in
condiments of exotic names and flavours;
- never mind their origins -

cardamom
origanum

rosemary and thyme . . .

But then, because
we try never to quite give in without a fight
I quickly recall that from
sweeping airports,
driving taxis and
cleaning rich old folks' bodies,

Cousin Kwaku, Bro Kofi, Sissie Yaa
and the rest of the extended family
go home to

New York's Flat and London's Shepherd Bushes
Amsterdam and Hamburg to
eat
more authentically and richly
than the kings and queens
we left at home.

So whose bourgeois palate
are we talking of
taking care of?

Eh, My Sister,
whose
bourgeois palate?

their visions of the future and
the immediate and urgent matter of
their sexual prowess.

Which name do you know it by, My Sister?

Shito
Piripiri
Miripiri
chili
cayenne
agoi
???

We speak of
the beginning and end of all heat . . .

Where I come from
we called it *muoko*
its etymology
completely lost in
millennias into which
harried wives
ground and ground and ground
the precious stuff . . .

If we insisted on counting,
we could end up with one hundred species, and
still not be done.

My Sister,
when The Pepper-person's pepper moved out of
the shrines and the temples,
it stayed for a thousand more years
in near-by habitations known only to locals in
Africa and Asia . . .

– another ancient and spicy secret,
valued in equal parts with gold dust
then, but soon to be

just one more Third World exotica
variously liked and apologised for.

These days,
between the mildest and the most abrasive,
green, red, yellow, thin, squat, full or hollow,
peppers
grace supermarket stalls from
Atlanta through London to Zurich . . .

from which places
we zero in
on the issue of how
we take care of our bourgeois palates.